*Sākhī*s about the Founder

The term *janamsākhī* (life story) is traditionally used for a set of narratives that include a sequence of chronologically recorded anecdotes about the life and activities of Bābā Nānak (1469–1539), the founder of the Sikh *panth* (community). Selections from his poetic compositions make up a large part of these texts and serve as the thread along which the short anecdotes in prose are neatly arranged. A shared subject, namely the life of Bābā Nānak, a loose episodic style of presentation, and Punjabi clothed in Gurmukhi ("[Script] of the *Gurmukh*s," i.e. those who look toward the *gurū*) as the medium of expression and inscription are the features that provide coherence to this literary corpus.

This article will focus on three narratives that were created within a century or so from the death of Bābā Nānak. On the basis of the titles used in their printed editions, these texts are presently known as *Bālā Janamsākhī* (or *Janamsākhī Bhāī Bālā*; Lahore, 1871), *Purātan Janamsākhī* (Amritsar, 1927), and *Miharvān Janamsākhī* (Amritsar, 1962). For the compiler of the *Purātan Janamsākhī*, Bābā Nānak and his writings are the focus of attention, and he did not feel the need to provide any information about himself. Scholars have argued for the historicity of Bālā Sandhū, believed to be the author of the *Bālā Janamsākhī*, but no evidence is available to support this contention. The claim for Bālā being the companion of Bābā Nānak is created essentially to authenticate the story reported in this text. Miharvān Sodhī (d. 1640) was head of a schismatic group within the *panth*. A prolific writer, he created a large body of literature himself, and also served as the subject of a biography written in his honor by Harijī (d. 1696), his son (Bansal, 1977).

The currently circulating editions of these texts include introductions that comment on the issues of their authorship, the date of their composition, and their respective place within the larger body of Sikh literature. In addition, a number of scholarly works focus on the relevance of these texts for the understanding of the life of Bābā Nānak and early Sikh history (K. Singh *et al.*, 1962; 1969; J. Singh, 1967; P. Singh, 1968; McLeod, 1968; 1978). Barring the consensus that these texts were produced within a century or so from Bābā Nānak's death, scholarly opinions differ on almost all the key issues.

For instance, there are claims for each of these texts to be considered the oldest in terms of its production (with regard to the *Bālā Janamsākhī*, see McLeod, 2007, 38–39; to the *Purātan Janamsākhī*, see Jaggi, 1977, 50; to the *Miharvān Janamsākhī*, see K. Singh *et al.*, 1962, viii, 81–83). As for their reception among the later generations of Sikhs, the current narrative considers the *Bālā Janamsākhī* to have enjoyed the position of being the standard version of Bābā Nānak's life. Reportedly E. Trumpp, a German philologist who visited the Punjab in the 1870s, discovered a manuscript that evoked great interest among the reform-minded Sikhs in the last quarter of the 19th century. A facsimile and a printed edition of this text were made available in 1883 and 1885, respectively, and it was eventually published under the title *Purātan Janamsākhī*, which subsequently became its popular name. In addition, some scholars hold the view that in spite of the fact that there was nothing "heretical" about the contents of the *Miharvān Janamsākhī*, its production within the schismatic group did not permit the text to acquire much recognition within the *panth* (McLeod, 2007, 38–39).

There are diverse views as to the relevance of the information enshrined in these texts. A group of scholars invested considerable time and energy in identifying the places mentioned therein, and then produced elaborate maps of Bābā Nānak's travels (F. Singh, 1969). Others borrowed the term "hagiography" from the Gospel studies to describe these texts, and then went on to dismiss their role as sources of Sikh history. For them, "unlike the prisoners in a court of law, the Janam Sakhis must be held guilty until proved innocent" (McLeod, 1980, 25–26). Yet another group of writers carved out a middle position, which involved excising the miraculous elements from these accounts and creating versions of Bābā Nānak's life that these people believe to be historically accurate (H. Singh, 1969).

The recent developments in the study of early Sikh texts have afforded the opportunity to revisit the *janamsākhī*s and suggest some revisions in the existing scholarship. This article is divided into three sections: (1) a reconstruction of the context that was conducive to the emergence of these texts, followed by basic information about their early manuscripts;

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(2) a discussion of issues such as the time and circumstances of their production and the evolution of their respective lines of manuscripts; (3) a brief conclusion, which comments on the relevance of this literature for the present-day Sikh *panth*.

Three assumptions form the basis of this article. First and foremost, it is imperative that the approach be from the bottom up and that the primary data to understand these texts be culled from the sources that were contemporaneous to them. Here, the reversal of the thinking that dominates the existing scholarship is sought. It is hard to argue that the mere existence of a *gurdvārā* building in the 2010s could be taken as evidence for the claim that Bābā Nānak sanctified that spot by his visit. Additional information and careful scanning of the relevant traditions are needed before claims of this sort can be accepted. In the same way, interpreting the publication of the *Bālā Janamsākhī* in 1871 and the 14 editions that appeared by 1900 in terms of the high degree of authority it enjoyed in early Sikh history is problematic. This conclusion may be true, but it can only be reached after a careful scrutiny of the thinking of Harsukh Rai (d. 1890), the commercial publisher who selected this version for publication, and of others who followed his decision (Davis, 1983, 32).

Secondly, the assumption insists itself that the appropriate way to evaluate the usefulness of these texts is to work out their precise date as well as the context of their production, and then assess their importance as a source for Sikh history. The narrative that is closest to Bābā Nānak's period deserves priority in any attempt to understand the life of Bābā Nānak and the founding of the *panth*, while the later ones largely provide insights into how the information in circulation was mediated through the creative impulses of subsequent authors. These writers wanted to offer their homage to Bābā Nānak and translated this sentiment by filling in what they thought to be gaps in the existing knowledge about his life. They did this not only for their own benefit but also for the benefit of their audiences.

Finally, the titles of the printed editions in current use – *Bālā Janamsākhī, Purātan Janamsākhī*, and *Miharvān Janamsākhī* – do not appear in the early manuscripts. Assigning these texts their original titles is a prerequisite for serious scholarship and will bring in the required degree of historical accuracy to this area of study. The details inherent in the original titles of these texts also have an important bearing on what their authors had hoped to accomplish. Equally importantly, the titles assigned to all these texts by printing enterprises are misnomers that deserve to be revised (more research is needed, but for a preliminary survey, see table 1).

The Sources

What is known about the production context of the *janamsākhī*s? Since Bābā Nānak is the subject of the stories included in this literature, it seems reasonable to begin with his writings, the places

Table 1: Printed editions and manuscript titles

Printed edition	Titles in the early manuscripts
Purātan Janamsākhī	*Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī: Ādi Ant kī* (Life Story of Bābā Nānak Jī: From Beginning to End). This title appears in a manuscript dated 1758, which the evidence at our disposal points to be a copy of the original version.
Miharvān Janamsākhī	In its manuscripts, this *janamsākhī* appears as three independent texts: *Sac Khaṇḍ Pothī* (Book of Divine Abode) attributed to Miharvān, *Harijī Pothī* (Book by Harijī [d. 1696, Miharvān's son]), and *Caturbhuj Pothī* (Book by Caturbhuj [death date unknown, Miharvān's second son]). The titles above are consistently recorded in all the manuscript.
Bālā Janamsākhī	*Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī* (Life Story of Srī Gurū Bābā Nānak Jī). This title appears in the earliest extant manuscript, dated 1658.

associated with him, and the cultural ethos of his time in order to gain some idea of what might have generated the stories that could be of interest not only to the Sikhs of his time but also to those who see themselves as the bearers of his legacy some five centuries later.

Being situated on the routes that connected present-day India with Central Asia and the Middle East, the region of Bābā Nānak's birth came on the itinerary of travelers of all sorts. As for the local people, sources claim that one goes to distant lands (*prades*) to seek knowledge (*bharman*), search for employment (*cākrī*), or participate in "big trade" (*saudāgarī*). Travel and the meeting of travelers (*pradesī*s) constitute a critical strand in Bābā Nānak's thinking. He mentions his travels to the edges of the earth (*GG.* p. 156 [all references to the *Gurū Granth* are from *Śabadārth Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib Jī*, 1969]), and also writes about the complexities of the experience of being away from home. He mentions the sense of emptiness felt by those who leave (*GG.* pp. 439, 767) and the sadness that strikes the ones that are left behind (*GG.* p. 56). Since travelers have to return to their native places, Bābā Nānak warns against developing any kind of dependence on them (*GG.* p. 731). For him, traveling to *prades* is a challenge that is worth confronting. After all, what other way is there to see, understand, and be able to appreciate the flow of rivers, the thundering of the clouds, the movement of migratory birds, and the complexity and multiplicity of human lives.

Given the location of his native village and the social standing of his family, it seems fair to suggest that he was exposed to stories of this kind early in his life, thus collecting ample material for the weaving of his own stories. It is hard to imagine that Bābā Nānak, while still in his teens, did not accompany his father to Lahore, the cultural center and seat of political power of his native region. There, he would have met his father's colleagues from other villages, who would also have come to deposit their biannual revenues in the treasury. These visits would also have afforded him an insight into the activities taking place at the seat of the provincial chief (*ṣūbadār*). When around 20, he shifted to Sultanpur, and his approximately decade-long stay there would have given him ample opportunity to listen to the stories of travelers who happened to pass by the town on their journeys or pilgrimages to the east (Delhi, Banaras), west (Balakh Bukhara on the Silk route, and Mecca), north (the Devī and Śiva shrines in the Śivālik Hills and the Himalayas), and south (Sindh). He himself took to full-time traveling in the next two decades, and the experiences gathered during these travels would have resulted in a plethora of stories about his visits to different places, not to mention those that he heard from other people along the way.

The memories of his travels would have served as an effective backdrop for his role of being the *bābā* (religious leader) at Kartarpur. The anecdotes about his travels and the people he met kept his audience enthralled, and also earned him a considerable degree of respect in the eyes of the families gathered around him. It is hard to imagine that during the devotional sessions at Kartarpur, he would not have referred to his visits to some Sufi, Nāth, Vaiṣṇava, or other site while explaining his compositions. In his post-Kartarpur travels, it is certain that on his return, he reported to the local community where he had gone, whom he had met, and what had happened there.

These data offer reasonable grounds for suggesting not only that the stories at the heart of the *janamsākhī* literature originated during Bābā Nānak's lifetime but also that he himself initiated the making of this corpus. Others would have contributed to this pool in their own distinct ways. For instance, his wife Mātā Sulakhaṇī is likely to have shared the story of how she felt when Nānak left Talwandi and went to Sultanpur in search of work, leaving their two sons behind, and so on. After his passing, the need must have been felt to generate a complete story of his life and mission of "saving the world" (*jagat nistāran*) for the sake of communicating it to the children of the first generation as well as to the new entrants in the *panth*. This context eventually gave rise to the first written account on this subject, as described below; it then began to be copied, while its narratives were progressively expanded – a process that continues to this day.

The manuscripts that emerged from this complex exercise provide us with the next layer of sources to understand the subject under discussion. On the basis of my fieldwork, examination of the relevant colophons, and testimonies of scholars regarding the manuscripts they had the opportunity to examine, the following picture emerges:

Table 2: Dates of manuscripts

Text	Manuscripts that are/were in existence
Purātan Janamsākhī	1588*, 1640, 1670, 1690, 1727, 1730, 1731, 1733, 1734, 1757, 1758, 1772, 1787, 1790, and two undated pre-1800 manuscripts, which brings the total number to 16 (source: Macauliffe, 1985, lxxxvi; see also Mann & Shah, forthcoming).
Miharvān Janamsākhī	1651, 1751, 1754, 1776, 1781.
Bālā Janamsākhī	1658, 1724, 1739, 1740, 1755, 1760, 1768, 1768, 1770, 1777, 1777, 1781, 1783, 1788, and 1799, for a total of 15 (G. Kaur, 1987, 464–468).

It should be noted that the table above hardly includes all the manuscripts that were produced between the date of composition and 1800, nor is there any claim to the effect that the list accounts for all manuscripts presently available. In any case, the manuscripts above provide the critical mass to begin a serious effort toward understanding the compilation and the later history of these texts.

Understanding the *Janamsākhī*s

In 1927, a Sikh savant, writer, and commercial publisher named Vir Singh (d. 1957) released a text under the self-chosen title *Purātan Janamsākhī*. Although the use of the adjective *purātan* to describe this text is already attested around 1800, it was Vir Singh's inclusion of this term in the actual title that assigned it the status of being the "oldest" in circulation (Dhillon, 2004, 16). The early manuscripts of this text call it *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī*. They consistently lack a table of contents and reflect no inclination to number the stories included in the narrative. Following M.A. Macauliffe's edition (1885), which was published under the title of *Janam Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī*, Vir Singh divided the contents of his own edition into 57 stories. The title chosen by Vir Singh and the arbitrary division of its contents by M.A. Macauliffe are now an indivisible part of the scholarly discourse on this text.

The *Miharvān Janamsākhī*, published in 1962, was the last one to appear in print. In the early manuscripts, the contents that followed this title appear in the form of a set of independent texts. The first of these is named the *Sac Khaṇḍ Pothī* and is clearly attributed to Miharvān Sodhī. The next two texts are titled *Harijī Pothī* and *Caturbhuj Pothī*, which creates the impression that they are attributed to Harijī and Caturbhuj, two sons of Miharvān Sodhī. The early manuscripts of these texts contain tables of contents and provide a careful numbering of the stories. The three texts contain 153, 61, and 74 stories, respectively, and these are replicated in later copies (see table 1).

The *Bālā Janamsākhī*, which came to be known as such after the printed version adopted this title, represents the third strand within this literature. The earliest extant manuscript of this text is entitled *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī*, provides a table of contents, and includes stories numbered from 1 to 79. The date of the manuscript is recorded as 1658. Unlike the writings of the Miharvān Sodhī family, the scribes of this line of manuscripts are somewhat generous in their counting and not averse to making additions to the text. The printing enterprises made good use of this traditional flexibility of the text, and its current edition contains 218 stories – which is around three times the 75 or so stories that originally made up this narrative.

Determining the compilation date of these texts is a relatively complicated endeavor. Since the earliest manuscript on record, dated 1588, belongs to the *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī*, we could begin our discussion with it. M.A. Macauliffe's claim for ownership of this manuscript did not evoke much interest among scholars. The indifference is not hard to understand. Until recently, the commonly held view was that the *Kartārpur Pothī*, compiled in 1604 under the guidance of Gurū Arjan (1581–1606), was the first written document in Sikh literature (Oberoi, 1994, 49). For most 20th-century scholars, the manuscript of a nonscriptural text of 1588 was rather hard to imagine. The presence of six compositions of Gurū Arjan in the *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* gave rise to the belief that the text must have been compiled after 1606, the year of his death. In his edition, Vir Singh argued in favor of dating the text to the mid-1630s (V. Singh, 1927, 212).

Given the current state of knowledge on 16th-century writings, the existence of a manuscript of the *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* compiled in the 1580s does not seem to be an anomaly (Mann, 2001, 32–50).

Nor does the presence of Gurū Arjan's composition eliminate the possibility of a compilation of this text in the 1580s. There are indeed traditions that allude to his writing of poetry before becoming the *gurū* in 1581, and even if one finds these problematic, there are some years between 1581 and 1588 in which these compositions could have been written as part of the earlier phase of his literary output. The presence of these compositions in the *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* could be taken to mean that its author was in close touch with the Sikh court at Ramdaspur and had access to the latest compositions generated there.

Furthermore, the colophon in the aforementioned *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* manuscript, dated 1640, records its being prepared in Burhanpur (in present-day Madhya Pradesh), several thousand kilometers away from the Sikh center. It is not entirely unreasonable to assume that some decades must have elapsed before the original manuscript attained sufficient renown to warrant being copied and carried to distant places by Sikhs. In addition, the compositions of Bābā Nānak recorded in *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* manuscripts give the impression that they were copied from some early source. In the *Kartārpur Pothī*, Bābā Nānak's *Japu* appears without any attribution or assignment of the *rāg* in which it needs to be sung, but in this *janamsākhī* (story 10), it is recorded as *Japu* Mahalā 1, and *rāg āsā* is assigned for its singing.

The people whom Bābā Nānak meets and the places that he visits in *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* have an interesting bearing on the issue of its dating.

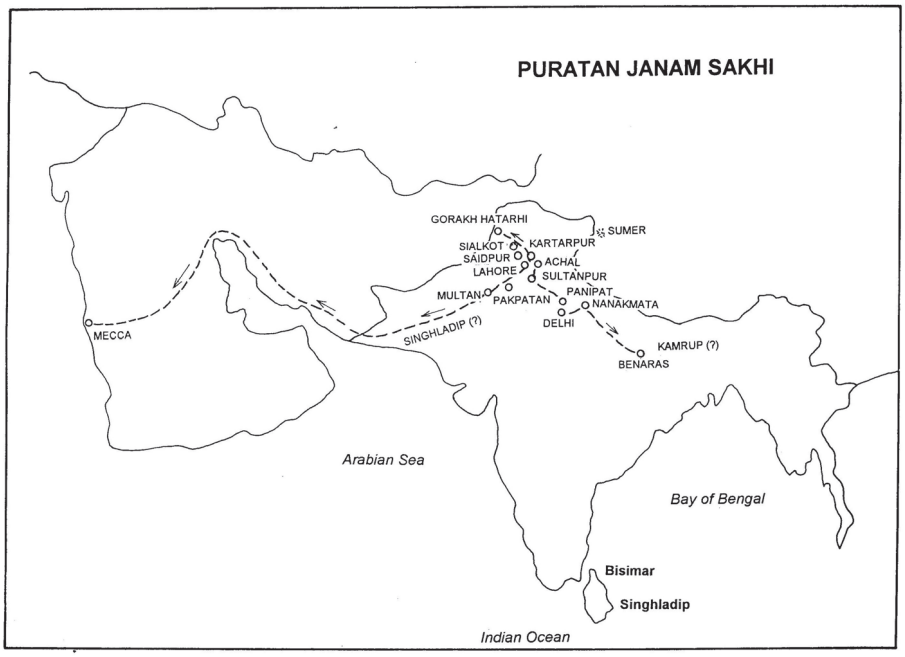
The number of Bābā Nānak's meetings with Hindu leaders and visits to Hindu places increases considerably in the later texts produced after Gurū Arjan's death in Mughal custody in 1606.

References to the existence of a manuscript from 1588, the simplicity of this text's structure, the brevity of its contents, the early versions of Bābā Nānak's compositions as preserved in the text, the relatively open attitude toward Islam, the frequent use of Persian terms all point to its being a text whose origin lies somewhere in the closing decades of the 16th century. A quick look at the travels of Bābā Nānak in the three texts eliminates any possibility of envisioning *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* as having emerged after the other two texts. It appears that, being the first, it keeps Bābā Nānak's travels largely restricted to the region of his birth, with the exception of Banaras and Mecca, whereas the later texts expanded them in all directions. A reversal of the process that would have the later text reduce the scope of the travels assigned to him in the previous one is rather hard to imagine.

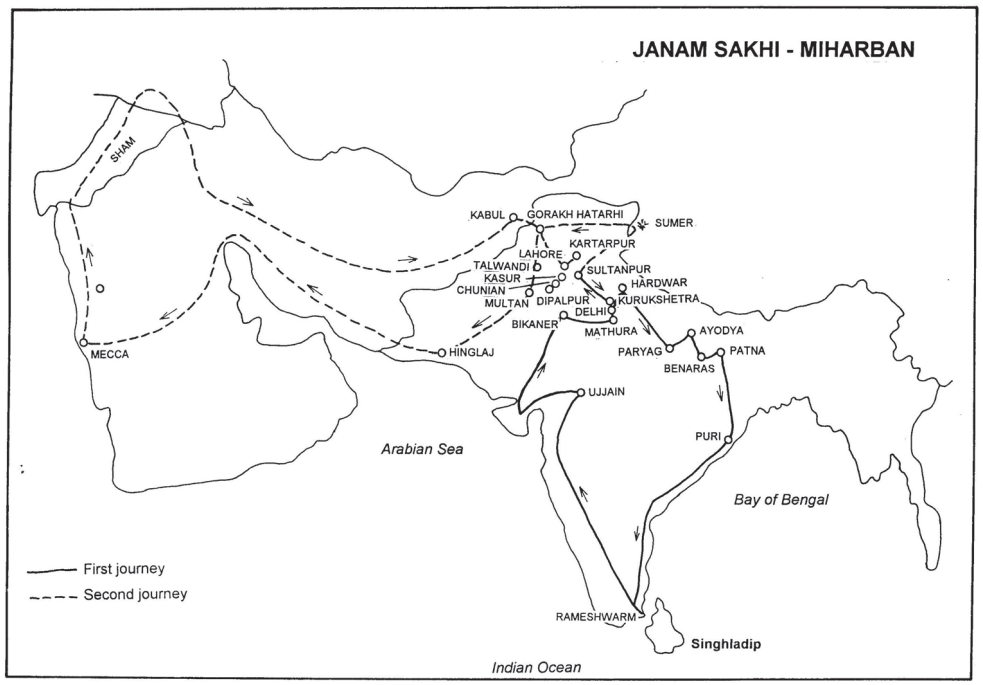
Religious figures:	
Hindu:	Catur Dās (i.e. Caturdās), Machindar (i.e. Matsyendranāth), Gorakh (i.e. Gorakhnāth), Braham Dās, Bharatharī (i.e. Bhartṛhari), Carpaṭ
Jain:	Anabhi Saraverha
Muslim:	Šaraf, Tatihar, Bajīd, Farīd, Braham, Kamāl, Mitta, Ḫidar, Bahawādī, Rukandin, Patiālā
Political figures:	
Hindu:	Śivanābh
Muslim:	Rāi Bular, Dawlat Ḫān, Braham Beġ, Bābur
Sacred sites:	
Hindu:	Banaras, Baijnath, Sumer(?)
Muslim:	Panipat, Pakpattan (twice), Mecca

It may also be useful to point out that *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* uses Laihindi, a dialect of Punjabi spoken in West Punjab, in the present-day Rawalpindi area of Pakistan. The rise of this text in that area fits well with evidence that points to a thriving Sikh community in that area around 1600. There have been debates regarding specific villages as potential locations for the creation of this text, but what matters most is that the text was prepared in a congregation that was far away from the seat of Bābā Nānak's successors in central Punjab.

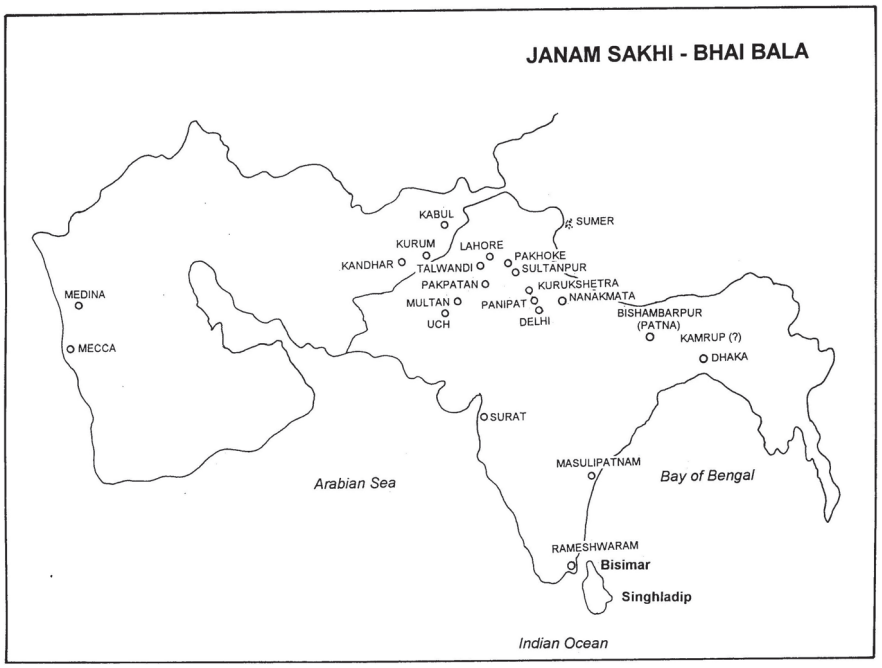
Arguably, this situation evokes the possibility that while the memory of the founder was firm within the community at places such as Goindwal (1551–1574) and Ramdaspur (established 1574), the need to record the stories about Bābā Nānak's life began to be felt in congregations that lay far away from the center. The people who knew the founder were passing on, and their children needed to be told about the great *bābā*. Working along these lines, a West Punjabi Sikh savant, perhaps a *masand* (deputy), took up the challenge of preserving these memories, and in the process created a verbal icon



Map 1: Bābā Nānak's travels, the version compiled in the 1580s.



Map 2: Bābā Nānak's travels, the version compiled in the 1610s.



Map 3: Bābā Nānak's travels, the version compiled in the 1640s.

that is now the fountainhead of information about Bābā Nānak. Moving on to the *janamsākhī* corpus associated with the Miharvān family, the evidence regarding its origin is straightforward. Harijī mentions that Miharvān Sodhī had completed his *sākhīs* prior to 1619 (Bansal, 1977, 234). Furthermore, a colophon recorded in 1651 refers to the inscription of *Harijī Pothī* in 1650 and of *Caturbhuj Pothī* in 1651. The context of this colophon, however, leaves the possibility open that the contents of all these three texts (153, 61, and 74 stories) belonged to Miharvān Sodhī and his sons only finalized their compilation of the latter two after his death. This would then make them pre-1640 texts.

The schismatic character of this corpus is visible from the very opening of the *Sac Khaṇḍ Pothī*. Its prologue declares Bābā Nānak to be the incarnation of Janak, a royal figure in the Hindu epic *Rāmāyaṇa* – a lineage to which Miharvān Sodhī and his sons themselves believe to belong. Furthermore, while the *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* describes Bābā Nānak's activity at Kartarpur in over 15 stories, the *Sac Khaṇḍ Pothī* includes only one story about that period. The very names of the two later texts in this set allude to the importance assigned to their respective compilers/scribes/*gurū*s within their group, rather than Bābā Nānak, the supposed subject of these texts. They also make a concerted effort to place Bābā Nānak in the line of spiritual giants since the time of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, present themselves as his current manifestations, and take great pride in their ability to interpret his compositions and tell the audience about the benefits of reciting them (*paramārth*). As for the community, Miharvān labels it the Nānak Panth, a personal following of Nānak (the term is absent in the writings of the *gurū*s and *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī*) and by extension sees himself to be enjoying the same authority as the founder.

The origin of the *Bālā Janamsākhī* or *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī* as the third text in the proposed sequence is invariably associated with the earliest manuscript of this text from 1658. The corrections made in its margins, the presence of 28 illustrations indicating a considerable advance on the routine texts of the time, the table of contents, and the numbering of stories point to its being a copy of an earlier text. At this stage of research, it is clear that this particular text cannot be the original manuscript. However, no documentary evidence has so far surfaced that could help us date this text with any degree of certainty. An undated manuscript of this text is available, but more works needs to be done to establish its pre-1658 compilation. At this point, it could be argued that *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī* was written during the lifetime of Handāḷ Ghaṇgass (d. 1648), the leader of another schismatic group that also arose in the first half of

the 17th century. In the sequence of the *janamsākhī*s under discussion here, it certainly belongs to a period after the completion of the *Sac Khaṇḍ Pothī* but is likely to be contemporaneous with the *Harijī Pothī* and *Caturbhuj Pothī*.

The *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī* has interesting features of its own. It opens with an extended introduction of Bālā Sandhū, who is reported to have grown up with Nānak, stayed with him at Sultanpur, and accompanied him during his travels, and to have moved to Kartarpur for some time before returning to Talwandi. The delineation of Bābā Nānak's character is unquestionably beyond the limitations of time and space. Like in the literary corpus emerging from the Miharvān Sodhī family, Bābā Nānak is presented here as one within a long lineage of spiritual figures, and Handāḷ Ghaṇgass as the current representative of this line is assigned a place above Bābā Nānak in terms of spiritual merit.

The compiler's treatment of dates is rather strange. The year assigned for the writing of the text is 1525, which is 14 years before the death of Bābā Nānak. His date of birth is declared to be Oct 5, 1469, which is different from the one given in the previous two texts, namely Apr 15, 1469. An adequate explanation for this singular feature of the *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī* is yet to come forth.

The three texts under discussion eventually assumed the role of primary sources of information for Sikh scholars interested in creating independent narratives of Bābā Nānak's life. Their efforts included rewriting and expanding the stories, shifting them around from their original sequence, and introducing new stories to make the narrative more dramatic. By the 1800s, these texts had evolved into a multilayered corpus that contained not only exact copies of them but also layers of composite texts with stories mixed from different strands as well as expanded versions of Bābā Nānak's life. As a result, the core of the 57 stories found in the original *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* from the 1580s grew into a mega-synthetic creative opus in Santokh Singh's *Nānak Prakāś* (see V. Singh, 1963), which covers over six thousand pages in the currently circulating printed edition.

While this expansive literary activity was going on, concerns regarding the accuracy of the details pertaining to Bābā Nānak's life also begin to appear in writings of the second half of the 18th century. Attributed to the exegesis of Manī Siṅgh (d. 1738), a leading Sikh scholar of the early 18th century, a *janamsākhī* entitled *Giān Ratnāvalī* (A Rosary of Jewels of Wisdom) was compiled by Sūrat Siṅgh, a custodian (*granthī*) at the Darbār Sāhib in Amritsar in the late 1760s. This text reports that the writings of Miharvān Sodhī and his family are not trustworthy sources of information on Bābā Nānak's life and teachings (Sabar, 1993, 913). Rattan Siṅgh Bhaṅgū (d. 1846), a major historian writing in the early 19th century, refers to the *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* as the authoritative version of Bābā Nānak's life and states that the *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī* and *Miharvān Janamsākhī* were not acceptable sources of information (Dhillon, 2004, 16, 180).

The available data point to the *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* being the earliest text in this corpus of literature. It was produced in West Punjab in the closing decades of the 16th century. Soon after its composition, the text attained a degree of authority, thus creating a demand for copies that were then taken to wherever Sikhs went. The integrity of its contents, the bulk of its copies, and references to it in later literature all suggest that this was the text to which the early Sikhs turned in order to learn about the life of Bābā Nānak, the founder of their tradition. If this is a reasonable reconstruction of history, then one can envision the possibility, however remote, that the author of the *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī* may have personally met Bābā Nānak in Kartarpur or during his travels to West Punjab in the 1530s. If that did not happen, then there is a fair chance that he had met some fellow Sikhs who had personally known Bābā Nānak. This context assigns the text a unique position within the *janamsākhī* corpus and identifies it as the most important source to understand the details of Bābā Nānak's life.

Simultaneously, the rise in the number of manuscripts of the *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī* from the second half of the 18th century onward is visible in the table presented above. This critical shift within the *janamsākhī* literature has yet to be registered by scholars in the field, and an investigation of the reasons for this shift has yet to take place. The compilation of the *Giān Ratnāvalī* by Sūrat Siṅgh apparently gave rise to a complex situation. In his concerted effort to denounce the literature produced by the Miharvān Sodhī family, he inadvertently created a situation in which the person of Bālā Sandhū entered the mainstream narrative of Bābā Nānak's life and became an integral part of the Sikh visual imagination that illustrated it.

The *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī*'s image of Bābā Nānak with Mardānā (a Sikh of Muslim background) was expanded to include the presence of Bālā Sandhū

(a Sikh of Jaṭṭ/nomadic background, mistakenly identified as Hindu) holding a ceremonial whisk of peacock feathers and standing/sitting on the left-hand side. This new image with Bābā Nānak at the center and two followers of Hindu and Muslim background sitting on each side, framed in a lush green natural setting, exuded a profound sense of aesthetic, spiritual, and temporal harmony and fitted very well into the ethos of Sikh rule. With Sant Siṅgh, son of Sūrat Siṅgh, in charge of renovations at the Darbār Sāhib, Amritsar, in the 1820s, this image of the trio was singled out to appear in the murals above the entrance to the causeway as well as that of the Darbār Sāhib. This placement was the highest honor that the original creator of this image could have ever imagined, and having once acquired this eminence, there was no stopping its move toward iconicity.

It quickly replaced the earlier image of Bābā Nānak and Mardānā, appearing on mid-19th-century Sikh tokens, on the silver canopies that adorned the public display of the *Gurū Granth*, on pendants created for Sikh royalty, in woodcuts, and in stone carvings (*jālī*s), while the sway of Bālā Sandhū's presence, and by extension of the *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī* associated with him, over Sikh imagination seemingly resulted in the rescheduling of Bābā Nānak's birthday celebrations (*gurpurab*) at Darbār Sāhib, Amritsar, from April (as recorded in the *Purātan Janamsākhī*) to November (as it appears in the *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī*).

Early in the 20th century, K.S. Dhillon, a scholar of considerable repute, made vehement public appeals to phase out the *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī* from Sikh literature and to shift the celebration of the birth of Bābā Nānak from November to April, whereas the commercial publishers doted on the miracle-oriented, open-ended narrative of *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī* and reeled out their glossy editions. Interestingly, in 2016, the situation is not significantly different than it was a century ago. The Sikhs continue to celebrate the birth of Bābā Nānak in mid-November, while the buying and taking home of the glossy editions of *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī* that are available in all the *gurdvārā* bookstores remain part of the pilgrimage of Sikh families to these places.

In conclusion, a set of observations is in order. The approach that builds on the assumption that there was some "pure" story of Bābā Nānak's life to which the writers from the Miharvān Sodhī's and Handāḷ Ghaṇgass's families made interpolations has to be abandoned. Sikhs are fortunate to have a text like that of the *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī kī*. Written within approximately half a century from Bābā Nānak's death, it is an excellent source to gain an understanding of the life and activities of the Sikh founder. Furthermore, the literature produced at the seats of authority of Miharvān Sodhī at Chunian, near Lahore, and by the followers of Handāḷ Ghaṇgass at Jandiala, near Amritsar, offers a critical source to develop a rich description of the early Sikh community. Finally, the reception of these texts over time has yet to be adequately traced. It is perhaps possible to find a convincing explanation for the shifting of Bābā Nānak's birth date by Handāḷ Ghaṇgass's supporters, and once this has been found, a case could be made to revert to the date mentioned in the earlier sources.

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